DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 752 HE 017 436

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TITLE The Policy Agenda for American Higher Education in the 1980s.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented to the Faculty, Northwestern Polytechnical University (Xian, People's Republic of China, October 1983).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Budgeting; College Administration; College Curriculum; *College Role; Declining Enrollment; *Educational Objectives; Educational Opportunities; *Educational Trends; Enrollment Trends; Financial Problems; Governance; Population Trends; *Postsecondary Education; *Public Policy; Resource Allocation; Retrenchment

ABSTRACT

Historical trends in American postsecondary education and policy issues for the 1980s are discussed. It is noted that at the same time that access to higher education has been increased, there has been a commitment to diversity in colleges. Along with increased numbers of college-aged persons in the 1960s, the U.S. Government, illustrating a commitment to equal educational opportunity, provided financial support to large numbers of disadvantaged and minority students. In the 1970s, there began an equally dramatic decline in the number of college-goers, and a period of retrenchment occurred. Three major changes affecting higher education in the last 20 years are: the decline in the overall number of postsecondary students; a change in the type of student served by higher education, with increased numbers of adult students; and a shift in what Americans expect or demand from their investment in a college education. The following major types of conflict and tension are discussed: tensions of purpose and resource allocation, tensions of governance, and tensions of curriculum. It is suggested that the goal of excellence in some ways contradicts the goals of social justice. In addition, curriculum designers must reconcile the need to prepare students for success after graduation with the value of a liberal education. (SW)

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# THE POLICY AGENDA FOR AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE 1980s

T. Benjamin Massey

There can be nothing more important to humankind than knowledge. It is the explanation of our present and the resource of our future. As the agent responsible for generating and imparting knowledge, there can be no social institution more vital to us than the university. Today dwindling natural resources, rapid advances in technology, and unstable relations between countries present our colleges and universities with unprecedented challenges. As we move towards the twenty-first century, it will be necessary that we draw heavily upon the capabilities of our institutions of higher learning.

Knowledge belongs to no nation, and to ensure the well-being and survival of our planet, it must be shared by all nations. There is an urgent need for colleges and universities throughout the world to cooperate in the search for and dissemination of knowledge. In the service of this goal, it is also of critical importance that we improve international understandings of the way in which higher education is organized in our separate countries. Our colleges and universities reflect changing social values and thus are subject to both internal realities and external influences. Educators and students alike must understand the various influences on higher education.

For these reasons I have suggested, I am especially pleased to have the opportunity to speak to you today about higher education in the United States. Our country has before it a complex agenda of policy-setting and action-taking. I would like

HE017436

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to summarize American higher education as we find it today and to mention those issues which I believe are most prominent.

Overview of American Postsecondary Education

The situation of American higher education in 1982 is perhaps best described as being very different of that of 1962, twenty years ago. In the 60s two interconnected developments converged to significantly increase participation in postsecondary education beyond all previous levels. One development had to do with the accessibility of higher education and the other concerned the number of college-going students in the United States.

With regard to accessibility, Martin Trow, an American scholar of higher education, has noted that the history of postsecondary learning the United States has been characterized by a steady movement from education solely for the elite to education for the masses and then to what he terms "universal access." A survey of the more than 3,000 institutions of postsecondary education in the United States today would demonstrate that, at the same time we are increasing access, America has a commitment to diversity in higher education. Institutions of universal access seek to admit all aspiring students and allow those less well-prepared to prove their abilities through performance in their studies. Professor Trow has pointed out that, despite centrifugal pressure exerted by America's democratic ideals, institutions of universal access have not replaced elite institutions. Rather, they have helped

to make possible the continued existence of elite education by relieving elite colleges and universities of the obligation to admit students who do not meet their standards but who by democratic tradition are entitled to an education.

I mentioned two developments. Within the movement towards universal access in the United States, one must also take account of the education "explosion" of the 60s. Just after World War II, America had what has been termed a "baby boom": the highest number of births in its history. By the 1960s Americans representing this population bulge had reached college age.

Coupled with this demographic fact was the U.S. government's increasing implementation of a commitment to equal educational opportunity. Massive federal financial support made higher education available to large numbers of disadvantaged and minority students. Enrollments rose dramatically in the 60s, and many new postsecondary institutions opened to accommodate them. For the United States it was a period of very rapid growth in higher education.

In the 70s an equally dramatic decline in the number of college-goers began. The movement of the population bulge out of postsecondary education together with soaring costs associated with economic inflation make the 80s a period of contraction and, in general, great difficulty for higher education. Postsecondary institutions are now competing, sometimes intensely, for a limited pool of students in the traditional college age cohort.

Further, the 1972 federal Education Amendments broadened the postsecondary universe to include all forms of education beyond

high school and provided support for these learning options. Offerings in existing institutions were expanded to include alternative forms of learning, and education opportunities were extended to non-traditional constituencies, primarily part-time and adult students, who by the end of the 70s had begun to outnumber those in the traditional 18-22-year-old student age cohort. Higher Education saw emphasis on new instructional "delivery systems" for non-traditional students: individualized instruction, competency-based curricula, distance learning, and external degrees. Many institutions also began to offer standard and non-standard courses off campus.

To summarize, American postsecondary education over-built in the 60s and early 70s and now does not have a sufficient number of students, and particularly students in the traditional age range, to support all existing institutions. Faculty are being cut back and student dormitories go unfilled. Of the three main sectors of higher education -- research universities, four-year colleges, and two-year community colleges -- the four-year colleges whose mission is to teach mainly liberal art curricula have suffered most seriously as a result of enrollment shortfalls.

Conversely, community or two-year colleges have begun to enroll a higher proportion of the country's college-going population of all ages. When first established in the 60s, what we now term community colleges were known as junior colleges. Their purpose was to provide the first two years of the baccalaureate curriculum for students who would transfer to

senior colleges. Gradually this purpose changed, and today community colleges emphasize curricula that provide graduates with vocational preparation. Many of these curricula are highly technical. At present only about 25% of all students enrolled in community colleges seek preparation for transfer to senior institutions. The remainder seek training in skills that will enhance their employability or job performance.

Thus in America we have seen in the last twenty years at least three major changes affecting higher education. First, there is a decline in the overall number of students entering postsecondary institutions. Second, there is a change in the type of student served by higher education. More adults are enrolling as a result of the career updating required by new technology in a competitive marketplace and also as a consequence of the leisure time created by the shorter work week that most Americans enjoy. In the past half-decade, lifelong learning has emerged as a new American value. And finally, there is a shift in what Americans expect or demand from their investment in a college education. This last change has far-ranging implications for the curricula taught in postsecondary institutions.

It is apparent that all of these changes are interrelated and that they raise or reflect yet other issues. In examining what I have called the policy agenda for American higher education, one is struck by a formidable list of tensions. That is to say, in the United States we are seeing conflicting forces and values of both internal and external origin impacting upon higher education. I would like to focus somewhat more closely upon what

I find to be the three major categories of conflict and tension: tensions of purpose and resource allocation; tensions of governance; and tensions of curriculum.

Tensions of Purpose and Resource Allocation

Neither inside nor outside the university does there exist a consensus as to what should be the primary purpose of postsecondary education. Though, as I have suggested, American higher education is truly pluralistic, embracing a wide diversity of purposes. This is the case less as a result of design than of historical accumulation.

In the broadest terms, one finds evidence of an almost unconscious tension between the goal of equity and that of excellence. Recently the demand for excellence, or what may be translated as high standards in postsecondary education, has gathered new force. Education policy-makers in the United States have tended to overlook the relationship between higher and lower education. Teaching approaches adopted in elementary and secondary schools during the 1960s and 1970s have been largely experimental, with a general neglect of training in basic literacy and mathematics. Consequently, students entering postsecondary education have been less well prepared in these basic skills. For several years college entrance examination scores have declined, only this year for the first time showing a slight gain. What Americans term a "backlash" has occurred. Citizens throughout the country are registering their insistence upon a return to more conservative curricula in the lower schools

and at the same time their concern that higher education should not relax its standards to accommodate underprepared students. The appropriateness of remedial teaching at the postsecondary level is being debated throughout the country in all sectors of higher education.

In a fundamental sense, the goal of excellence conflicts with the goal of equity or equitability, by which is meant equal educational opportunity for all. Through enactment of legislation, the assurance of equal opportunity has come to be exacted of all colleges and universities that receive public funds. Therefore, all public postsecondary institutions are affected by this stipulation, and those private institutions receiving public subsidy are likewise affected. As a precondition of eligibility for public monies, institutions are required to articulate what are termed "affirmative action goals"--a desired percentage of total student enrollment which shall be composed of ethnic minorities. Owing to socioeconomic deprivation, minority students by and large are less well-prepared academically, many requiring remedial work, and here it can be seen that the goal of equity is placed in direct conflict with the goal of excellence in postsecondary education.

Another area of broad or general tension has to do with whether postsecondary education should serve the individual or serve the country. Many Americans believe that education should foster the student's personal self-fulfillment, even though he may intend no eventual application of his learning. Others assert that higher education has a critical role to play in

furthering the nation's economic productivity and that individual aspirations must be subsidiary to the needs of collectivities. Proponents of this latter view criticize higher education's aloofness from the sectors that surround it--business, labor, industry and government. They call for bridges to be built between the university and the commercial sector. Already, it has been pointed out, a loss of public confidence in the relevance of academic education is apparent in the emergence of non-university providers of postsecondary education. Businesses and industries are turning away from postsecondary institutions and designing their own training courses for professional staff. Universities often are not sufficiently well-funded to provide the technology necessary for this training. Such a development underscores the need to determine higher education's place in the balance between public and private centers of power in American life.

Within colleges and universities tensions are also evident. Particularly in comprehensive research universities, conflicting priorities compete for finite financial resources. Most public universities have a tripartite mission of teaching, research and service, though in actuality it is research that is most recognized and rewarded. In the university, faculty are promoted on the basis of scholarly productivity rather than teaching competence. Within the research mission itself, universities today witness a conflict between basic and applied research. Applied research more readily attracts external funding and is far more cost-effective than basic research. Some spokespersons

of higher education cite a neglect of basic research approaching crisis proportions. The research agenda of the country is being controlled from outside, they point out, and knowledge is not so much being advanced for the common good as it is being diverted to commercial, private ends.

The underlying theme in these observations is that the United States either does not possess or does not choose to allocate enough money to support the multiple purposes of postsecondary education.

## Tensions of Governance

Lack of central or federal control is seen as a striking feature of higher education in the United States in contrast with other developed countries of the world. No national policy on higher education exists in the United States. Bits and pieces of federal policy bear, in some cases considerably, upon postsecondary education; for example, through equal opportunity and affirmative action requirements and through the administration of educational benefits to military veterans. But there is no cohesive overarching set of guiding principles governing higher education at the national level. That this should be so is even more remarkable when one notes that, directly and indirectly, the federal government channels approximately fifteen billion dollars a year into higher education.

The responsibility for authorizing and, to varying extents, coordinating higher education is lodged in the separate state

governments and, where public community colleges are concerned, in local municipalities. Throughout most of this century, the majority of state governments have not involved themselves directly in the governance of postsecondary education, delegating control to state-appointed lay boards of trustees. In the past few years, however, this picture has begun to change dramatically.

Higher education's diminishing resources and the resulting competition among institutions, together with experiments in non-traditional education, have heightened public concern with protecting the interests of educational consumers and thus with holding colleges and universities accountable for their activities and expenditures. The autonomy of public postsecondary institutions to a great extent and that of privately funded institutions to a lesser extent has become eroded as demonstrations of accountability are demanded. State governments are becoming more and more intrusive in the affairs of the academy. Today most states have coordinating boards responsible for designating what degrees an institution may grant and approving new academic programs. Such oversight moves higher education away from a market model and toward a planning economic model, as state boards strive to guard public interest and trim expenditures through minimizing duplication in academic programming throughout the given state. Postsecondary institutions often bitterly resent the new role of these state higher education coordinating agencies.

Even more onerous than the state's activities in program approval and coordination, however, are its increasingly bureaucratic requirements in the area of budget preparation and justification. The amount of authority vested in state higher education boards with respect to budget approval varies from state to state, though the nationwide trend is for these boards to become more and more involved as intermediary agencies that stand between the institution and the state legislature that will determine the eventual monetary allocation. It is more and more often the case that the justification for projected expenditures submitted by a college or university must reflect instructional goals and objectives determined not chiefly by internal processes but rather by state boards that have developed statewide coordinated plans for postsecondary education. Tensions of propriety are inherent in this situation. One argument asserts that postsecondary institutions cannot remain vital if the reins of academic and fiscal control are taken from them, while another argument counters that postsecondary education has gone too long without proper coordination by an agency operating above the self-interested activities of individual institutions.

As an aspect of accountability, the evaluation of higher education must be mentioned. Until recently, state governments have licensed or chartered postsecondary institutions to operate within state borders but they have not required these institutions to meet qualitative standards above a minimum threshold. Rather, certification of what might be called the overall quality of a college or university has been reserved to

regional accrediting associations whose membership is made up of the colleges and universities within the region. The United States is divided into six accrediting regions. Although the accrediting associations conduct periodic assessments of their institutions according to specified procedures, these activities constitute essentially peer evaluations and as such are coming to be viewed as not sufficiently rigorous. State boards are beginning to conduct their own evaluations to provide quality assurances that it is felt the regional associations do not provide. As would be expected, conflicts are arising over the territorial prerogatives of states and regional associations in the evaluation of postsecondary education.

In addition to evaluations from regional associations, colleges and universities in the United States are subject to assessments and certifications by agencies responsible for accrediting specific curricula. These professional or program accrediting associations are more rigid and directive than regional associations in their requirements and have an attenuating effect upon the self-governance of colleges and universities through stipulations regarding curricula.

Tensions of Curriculum

At what might be termed the "macro" level, tensions of curriculum in American postsecondary education surround the question of how much of a baccalaureate curriculum should be devoted to liberal studies and how much to vocational or professional preparation. A recent study contrasted the goals

and expectations of college students in 1969 with those of students in 1978. When asked what they most hoped to gain from their postsecondary education, the American students sampled in 1969 replied that they sought to become broadly educated and in particular to understand the social and historical forces to which then current political developments might be attributed. A decade later, undergraduate students asked the same question answered that they intended to gain from their college education the occupational or professional credentials that would enable them to earn high salaries and live comfortably.

The differences in aspirations of these students separated by a decade have been attributed to a difference in value orientation popularly described as "we" versus "me." Students of the 60s, it is explained, felt a high moral consciousness, a sense of civic responsibility, and a solidarity among themselves. Students of the 70s, sociologists say, have grown up in the shadow of potential nuclear holocaust and can be expected to have no other reaction to the enormity of this fact than a wish to "live for today."

Sociological explanations accounting for differences in expectations and having implications for postsecondary curricula should be taken into account, but educators must also attend to other developments in American culture. One development that virtually eclipses all others is the technological revolution, which in less than ten years has had an impact equivalent to that of the industrial revolution. Telecommunications and microprocessing have changed not only the way in which we

transmit information but also the very nature of work. The technical requirements of career preparation have increased exponentially, with academic curricula barely able to keep pace.

The increased level of vocationalism in American postsecondary curricula has provoked among educators a reassertion of the value of liberal studies. In part this tendency toward vocational preparation is troubling because it signals a movement from an era of faculty dominance to an era of student market power. Educators wonder, will challenging programs of intellectual content be sacrificed for programs with broad market and vocational appeal? As this occurs, will agencies that accredit specialized curricula more and more hold sway over the broader curricular decisions of colleges and universities?

As I have mentioned, postsecondary education in the United States has to some degree segmented itself according to purpose, with community colleges specializing in occupational preparation and universities providing curricula that may lead to professional degrees. It may be predicted, I believe, that as a totality, American higher education will organize itself to balance vocational preparation with liberal studies. At comprehensive institutions, core and distribution requirements within baccalaureate curricula will be reviewed with this balance in mind and with humanistic values ascendant. The ethnocentrism that has accompanied a stress on vocational preparation will, of necessity, give way to internationism in certain dimensions of the curriculum. America is a young country and is maturing. In

some respects, it has yet to discover the rest of the world. Vocationalism is necessary and is here to stay but increasingly will be tempered by a broadened perspective upon itself. It is within the power of postsecondary education to teach that perspective.

Summary

I have tried to suggest here the tensions that underlie the issues to be found on the present policy agenda of higher education in the United States. The goal of excellence in certain fundamental aspects contradicts the goals of social justice. Differences of opinion exist as to how and by whom postsecondary institutions should be governed. And curriculum designers must reconcile the need to prepare students to succeed in the world beyond the university with the less tangible value to be derived from liberal education.

Last year the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching published a paper which eloquently places American higher education in the context of the society it both mirrors and serves. This paper, entitled "Higher Learning in the Nation's Service," sets forth four goals its authors believe to be centrally important:

> First, we call upon higher learning to renew its commitment to teach a new generation of students that differs from those served in the past. Second, we argue that the nation's interest will require a vigorous program of independent university-based research with appropriate linkages to other laboratories and research institutes. Third, as a new approach

to public service, we advocate public policy studies for all students, especially encouraging a new program of civic education for adults.

Finally, as a capstone, we urge colleges and universities to maintain their independence and help students to use knowledge wisely so that higher education's dual role of servant and critic of society may be vigorously protected and advanced. As higher learning gives new meaning to its historic purposes, of teaching, research, and public service, the future of both the academy and the nation will be more secure.

Address to faculty, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xian, People's Republic of China, Oct., 1983